



Testimony of Sarah White

In Support of H.B. 5205 An Act Concerning Fair Rent Commissions

Sens. Lopes and Anwar, Reps. Williams and Smith, and other members of the Committee: thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify. My name is Sarah White, and I am an attorney at the Connecticut Fair Housing Center, a civil rights organization dedicated to ensuring all of Connecticut's residents have access to the housing of their choice. I'm testifying in support of H.B. 5205, An Act Concerning Fair Rent Commissions.

We support requiring Fair Rent Commissions in cities and towns with populations of 14,000 or more so tenants have a practical mechanism to stop unconscionable rent increases or rent payments. Connecticut has allowed municipalities to set up Fair Rent Commissions for more than 30 years. Approximately two dozen cities and towns have them, including New Haven, Hartford, Stamford, Norwalk, Bridgeport, Glastonbury, Enfield, and West Hartford. But many larger towns and cities do not have Fair Rent Commissions, including Middletown, Waterbury, East Hartford, Meriden, New London, and Norwich. Tenants in towns without a Fair Rent Commission have no practical means of challenging excessive rent increases, even if they're elderly or disabled and should be protected from unfair increases under our Just Cause law, C.G.S. § 47a-23c.

Requiring Fair Rent Commissions is more important now than ever as rent has gone up significantly during the pandemic—average rents in Connecticut are up 12% over the last 18 months, with increases of nearly 20% in some markets in just the last year.¹ At the same time, vacancy rates are down, meaning tenants facing steep rent increases struggle to find new apartments. Some landlords appear to be taking advantage of the tight rental market by increasing rent in substandard, unsafe apartments, knowing tenants have little chance of finding another apartment.

We've heard from tenants facing rent increases of 25% or more—hundreds of dollars a month—for apartments infested with roaches and rats, full of holes in the walls and ceiling, and without sufficient heat. These tenants are already paying too much for unsafe housing, and rent

¹ Ginny Monk, "Why rent has risen sharply in Connecticut the past 18 months" *CT Insider*, Feb. 6, 2022. Available at <https://www.ctinsider.com/realestate/article/Why-monthly-rent-has-risen-sharply-in-Connecticut-16835535.php>

increases of hundreds of dollars a month are unjustified and unconscionable—it's pure price gouging. Tenants fortunate enough to live in a city or town with a Fair Rent Commission have a simple process to challenge rent increases, obtain a freeze or reduction in rent, and pressure their landlords to make repairs. But if there's no Fair Rent Commission, most tenants are out of luck—they essentially have to accept the rent increase, no matter how unfair, or scramble to find somewhere else to live in an extremely tight rental market with few vacancies.

Fair Rent Commissions work to stop excessive rent increases and to compel landlords to fix unsafe, unhealthy housing through a process that's accessible to everyone involved and requires minimal investment from the municipality. They also give tenants a much-needed mechanism to challenge retaliatory rent increases already prohibited under Connecticut law within 6 months of requesting repairs, making a complaint about discrimination, joining a tenant union, or taking other action to enforce their rights (see C.G.S. § 47a-20). Volunteer commissioners accept complaints from tenants about rent or rent increases that tenants believe are too high in light of factors such as unsafe or unhealthy apartment conditions or the market in the municipality for similar apartments. Commissions are empowered to investigate complaints, order code inspections, and hold hearings to determine whether or not the rent is so excessive as to be harsh and unconscionable, the standard set by the statute. The Commission doesn't have to freeze or reduce rent, but it has the option to—a tool unavailable to tenants in municipalities without a Fair Rent Commission—and a rent freeze can be a powerful mechanism to persuade a landlord to follow the housing, health, and fire codes and provide safe housing. Municipalities have the flexibility to decide the make-up of their Fair Rent Commission, and the majority do not have dedicated staff, although they can choose to. Tenants we've spoken to have successfully used Fair Rent Commissions without the help of a lawyer to stop unfair rent increases, in one case winning a year-long freeze on a monthly rent increase of more than a hundred dollars for an apartment in need of repairs.

Fair Rent Commissions should be required in all of our larger cities and towns so tenants are equally protected from excessive, unfair, or retaliatory rent increases. Fair Rent Commissions are a critical tool in addressing the twin crises of housing affordability and displacement, which are disproportionately borne by Black and Latinx tenants and have been worsened by the pandemic. They preserve housing stability and place a check on unscrupulous landlords charging more than is fair for substandard housing.